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Content Description and Survey Analysis from a Public Lecture on English Education for Children

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幼児・児童に対する英語教育をテーマとした公開講座における講義内容の概要とアンケート分析

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Abstract

This is a research note reporting on the contents of an open lecture on English education for children at the University of Shimane Junior College. The three-day lecture attempted to provide parents with some suggestions for helping their children acquire English in the home. Some of the topics covered include: 1) research on first language acquisition and ways to apply the results to second language acquisition, 2) the importance of child-directed speech and interesting comprehensible input, 3) creating an English language environment through reading aloud, using daily English expressions, songs, video, games and extensive reading, 4) the critical period hypothesis and common concerns about raising a child to be bilingual. In addition to content of the lectures, I will also share some interesting survey data I collected from the participants at the end of the course.

Open Lecture Contents

This paper describes the content of an open lecture on how Japanese parents can help their children acquire English with data from a survey given to participants of the lecture. I'll first discuss the main topics that I presented over the three-day lecture.

I first discussed how children go about learning their native language. The neurological process is not fully understood but researcher tells us that the process begins very early and progresses quite rapidly. Studies have shown that prenatal infants can listen and recognize their mother's voice. The newborn continues to recognize the sounds and patterns of the language environment in which it lives

and soon learns to accurately parse or segment the stream of auditory input into meaningful units. This is believed to happen when words are repeatedly associated with certain things such that the language input begins to take on meaning. For example, a baby can learn to recognize the word "ball" because of the repeated association of hearing "ball" while seeing and playing with an actual ball. This physical context is what makes the language input comprehensible for the baby and is a catalyst for acquisition.

On average, an English-speaking child will acquire and be able to use about 500 words by age three according to a study by Fenson et al., (1994). These first words are mostly tangible nouns that are familiar to the child. The child's close proximity and repeated exposure to the words which represent these tangible nouns make them easy to acquire. Therefore, when helping a child acquire English it may be best to begin by repeatedly associating familiar, tangible nouns with English input. An abstract word such as "Monday" is much more difficult to acquire than words for tangible nouns.

We can say that the process of acquiring a first or second language for a child before the age of about nine years old is fundamentally the same. In addition, acquiring the second language through the same process as the first was acquired, namely listening to a lot of comprehensible input, is likely the best and most efficient means of acquisition for children.

An important study on first language acquisition was conducted in the US with 36 month to 7 year old children in 42 families over a three year period. This study by Hart and Risley (1995) found that the average number of words spoken to the children in these families varied greatly. Some families averaged roughly 3,000 words per hour, while others spoke only 500 words per hour to their children. Results showed that the children who received more child-directed speech had larger vocabularies and IQ scores. Moreover, a follow-up test of vocabulary knowledge at 9 to 10 years old showed that on average the children who were spoken to more still had larger vocabularies. This study underscores the importance of providing a lot of comprehensible input for language acquisition.

However, as anyone who has had a conversation with a child knows, just comprehension isn't enough, the child must want to listen or else he'll be off to find something more enjoyable to do. At this point in the lecture I talked about an important distinction that I'd like parents to make when trying to help their children acquire English. Don't try to teach English to your children. An English lesson, as most Japanese parents remember them is just not very motivating to a small child. Instead, create an English environment in the home that the child can learn from. By "English environment" I mean doing all of the things parents normally do with their child in English instead of in Japanese as usual. For example, I'd like to encourage parents to play games, sing songs, read books or watch TV with their children in English. I think this is the best way to provide relevant comprehensible input while keeping the child's interest and attention through interesting activities.

The next part of the lecture focused on learning some fun children's songs using free online videos from Youtube.com. I recommended some of my favorite songs and Youtube channels for finding more videos. These videos are free, easily-accessible and made to appeal to children. Again, repetition is important so keeping a list of favorite song videos is a good idea for parents. Online videos or showing a child movies or TV programs in English is one of the easiest ways to create an English language environment in the home. However, I think it is important to interact with the child about what they are watching and to enjoy videos together. It may be

helpful for the parent to watch the movie in Japanese before watching it in English with the child. This way, the parent can pause the movie and explain parts the child couldn't understand. Also, setting a policy with the child from early on, such as only watching DVD movies or TV in English, may help avoid the tendency to prefer watching video in Japanese as the child gets older.

After talking about video, we moved on to discussing reading aloud to children in English. Reading to a child is such an important and bonding experience for parents and children in English as well as in Japanese. Depending on the age and level of English ability, the parent may want to simply talk about the pictures in a book in English without trying to read the story. I asked parents to point to interesting pictures in the book and tell their child the words for them in English. Then, using the pictures to point to and ask simple questions such as, "Is this a bird?" or "Are they happy?" which require only a "yes" or "no" answer. Giving the child a choice using "or" is also a good option for children who aren't very confident with English yet; "Is this a cat or a dog?" As English ability increases more difficult questions such as, "Who is this?", "What color is it?" or "Why is she sad?" and other questions requiring longer answers can be used.

The first day of the lecture finished with a summary of what I consider the most important aspects for helping children acquire English in the home. 1) Lots of comprehensible English input, which is essential for language acquisition at any age. 2) Making an English language environment for the child to access every day, even for just a short period of time. 3) Parents being interested and involved with the English activity and not leaving the child to do it on their own. 4) Having fun while using English is also critical for success.

On the second day, after a short review of the first session, we discussed the critical period hypothesis which basically claims there is a certain age period during which children can rapidly acquire a new language and eventually develop into advanced user of it. Research generally shows that those who start learning a second language before the age of about nine years old develop into more proficient users than people who began after that age. This doesn't mean however, that those who begin learning a second language after age nine are at a disadvantage or can't achieve high levels of ability.

Next, I tried to address a concern that many parents have about their children learning English; will it interfere with native language abilities? Learning a second language such as English does not hinder or prevent the development of the first language. Children can acquire many languages at the same time and there seems to be no limit to how much can be learned. The degree of language acquisition seems to simply depend on the amount, frequency and quality of language input. There are even cases where the second language improves more than the first language due to immigration or other factors that limit a child's exposure to the native language. Such cases illustrate the fact that a child's ability in either the first or second language is largely dependent on the child's language environment and the comprehensible input they receive.

Another related concern is whether raising a child to use two or more language will be confusing. I think it is confusing for the child and every bilingual child goes through a period where they speak with words from one or more languages. They are not yet able to categorize words into their respective languages so their utterances are a mixture of words from both. In time, the child will learn to stop mixing and use only Japanese or English words, with no noticeable confusion or delay. This is simply part of the natural developmental process for bilinguals and is

no cause for concern.

Following that, I talked about the issue of the time needed to acquire English. If we assume that first and second language acquisition occur by roughly the same process and at roughly the same rate, then a Japanese three-year old's language ability is the fruit of approximately 5,500 hours of Japanese input, assuming the child was hearing the input for at least five hours a day. It is logical to assume that a child would need about as many hours of English input in order to achieve comparable results. Language acquisition is usually a slow process that takes a number of years for children. However, by establishing daily habits to maintain an English language environment with sufficient English comprehensible input, the child will eventually acquire more and more language. Simply sending a child to take English lessons a few times a week will probably not provide enough time for the child to acquire English.

The next part of the open lecture focused on teaching common expressions and words that parents can use to talk about daily routines with their children in English. For example, getting dressed in the morning is a daily activity where parents can use some easy English phrases with the child, such as, "Put on your shirt." Each day I suggested that the parent could add another English expression to use for activities we do every day. In this way both parent and child can increase the amount of English they speak each day. In my opinion, there is no reason to make the child produce the English expressions. If they can listen and understand then they will be able to use them eventually. Hearing the child use the English expressions may be more satisfying for the parents to reassure themselves that their child is learning however, children often respond negatively to pressure to perform. In order to maintain the child's motivation to learn English, I think it is better to encourage them to speak in English, but not require it.

I introduced some children's TV programs and movies that I think would be helpful for parents depending on the age and interests of their children. Finding interesting but comprehensible content in English can become difficult as the child gets older. A Japanese child in junior high school, for example, would not be interested in a video for small children even though it may be more comprehensible than video designed for children their age to consume. It may become increasingly difficult to match a child's level of English comprehension with content they find enjoyable.

I also shared some educational toys and board games for learning English that can be purchased online in Japan. Online games and comic books or Japanese manga translated into English may help older children to get more exposure to English. More and more websites, books and resources for children learning English as a second language are being developed. Part of the aim of this open lecture was to inform the participants about some of these resources.

I mentioned reading books aloud to children earlier in the lectures but as the child gets old enough to learn the English alphabet and phonics, more attention can be given to helping children learn to read on their own. Again, many great resources including online games and video are very useful for teaching children phonics and helping them learn to read in English. Through learning phonics, a child will be able to associate the common pronunciations for letters with those letters in texts. This greatly helps children to guess at the pronunciation of words they encounter in print. Children's books often have great illustrations which supplement the bottom-up process of decoding text with the top-down process of using the context of the picture to figure out the meaning of the written words.

Leveled readers for English speaking children are a great resource for Japanese children learning English. These are books designed for native speaking children who are learning to read. The length and difficulty of the books increases according to the book level. Level 1 books begin from just a few words on each page and are usually designed to be especially easy for beginning readers to read and understand. Children and even adults who make a habit of reading from such easy text find that they can read and understand English books without relying on Japanese-based knowledge or translation. The beginning English reader needs a lot of support from parents as they do when learning to read in their first language. With practice and access to many leveled readers, children can progress through a series up to higher book levels. Of course, not everything in the books will be understood by the child and much will be left to guessing from the pictures or context, but as long as the child is enjoying reading and building a habit, this reading habit will guide them to acquire more and more English.

Data from the Survey

Twenty-one participants responded to the survey. Results showed that all but four of the respondents had children or grandchildren of their own. Responses showed there were thirteen mothers and 2 grandmothers who attended. Three of the participants were involved with teaching English to small children. Table 1 shows the ages of the respondent's children or grandchildren.

Table 1:

Age of Child or Grandchild	1	2	3	4	5	6-7	8-9	10-11	Junior high school or older
Number of responses	5	3	1	1	2	2	1	3	10

Fourteen of the parents that responded said they were not sending their child to any English conversation schools but three parents indicated they were. When asked how often the participants did English activities with their children, five people responded, "every day", three people said, "two to three times a week", five people answered, "once a week" and four people did no English activities. The survey asked participants to rank their own English levels; one person claimed to be "proficient," nine people said they could talk about "daily activities" in English, five people indicated they could only manage "greetings" level of fluency in English and five respondents claimed to have "almost no ability" in English.

I learned that people from with children of various ages attended this lecture. Only five of the respondent's children were doing activities in English every day and very attended some kind of English school. English activities included simply watching a DVD in English so I feel that adding more English activities to the child's everyday lifestyle is an important area to focus on for parents.

This research note attempted to share some of the main ideas and contents that I tried to communicate through the open lectures. The current trends all indicate that English will just continue to maintain its position as the global language for millions of people. Japanese parents of small children could do their sons and daughter a great service by starting to create an English language environment in their homes. This environment should allow children to receive lots of interesting and comprehensible input in a relaxed and fun manner. Parents don't need to

teach their children English necessarily, but it would be of great help to their child's education if they made a greater effort to incorporate English into their everyday lives and consciously try to expose their children to English. This lecture hopefully gave parents some tools with which to accomplish this task.

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